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DEPT. FOR EUR/WE (JLARREA), DRL (PKELLY, EKAO)

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SUBJECT: CHINESE PRIEST ENCOURAGES POTUS WORDS ON FREEDOM

REF: BEIJING 2984, BEIJING 3007

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Political Officer, POL, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Fr. Shu-Jie Chen of the Chinese Patriotic Church said February 21 that he appreciated the President's speaking out recently in China on religious freedom issues. Chen offered mild criticism of the Chinese government on human rights issues, but offered a generally positive view of religious life in his country. He downplayed persecution of the underground Catholic Church and emphasized the lack of education among its clergy. Chen was convincing in describing his reasons for choosing to work for the Patriotic Church, but we found his ability to rationalize the government's positions on religious freedom and his denigration of the underground church unsettling. End summary.

Praise for President

¶2. (C) Fr. Shu-Jie Chen, Vice Rector of the Catholic Seminary in Beijing and member of the Chinese Patriotic Church, told the Ambassador during a visit to Rome February 21 that he appreciated the President's speaking out recently in China on religious freedom issues. "We have to keep these issues in the public view," he said. Chen noted how important it was for the Chinese to see one of the most powerful men in the world attend church. "Most of our politicians would instead go to receptions," he commented.

Positive View

¶3. (C) Chen allowed that priests and sisters could be abused in China, and said that there were insufficient protections for religious personnel from the government. But overall, he painted a relatively positive picture of religious life in China. He said that he was "king" in his seminary and could do what he wanted within its walls and in the parish where he works. Chen claimed he himself - and not the government - set any limits on the number of students enrolling at the seminary. He told the Ambassador he had invited laypeople from ten Chinese provinces to come to the seminary for lay formation, and the program had come off without incident. Although Chen noted that evangelization was not an option for religious personnel, he seemed unconcerned. "We have to take things slowly" with the

government, he said.

¶4. (C) Chen described twice hosting the archbishop of Washington, D.C., Cardinal Theodore McCarrick at the seminary in Beijing. Chen said that on one occasion the government interpreter was clearly befuddled by the religious terminology being used. He finally allowed Chen to speak directly in English to McCarrick, thus facilitating communication. Chen's point: the government does not understand religion, but coexistence is possible. He noted that the government had given him permission to speak at a local university about the Catholic Church in the coming months, the first time he had been allowed to make such an appearance. (Chen offered to send the Ambassador a copy of his remarks.)

Poor View of Underground Church

¶5. (C) Turning to the underground church, Chen said he was working for unity. "We [Catholics in the official and underground churches] all suffer," he said. Chen claimed to have been active in the underground Church before becoming a priest, but said he had then gone in a different direction. In his opinion, the only viable option for a healthy Catholic Church in China is for underground church members to join the Patriotic Church. According to Chen, underground clergy are uneducated and adherents are usually elderly. "The young are all going to church," he said, making the clear distinction between "churches" and the "house masses" of the underground church.

¶6. (C) When asked about imprisoned or missing clergy, Chen said that one could not believe everything one read on the Kung Foundation web site. He recounted reading about the arrest of seven priests in Hebei province. When he investigated, he found that they hadn't been arrested at all - in fact, they had joined the Patriotic Church and simply had not yet returned to the diocese after a trip to Beijing. Chen also pointed out that many times underground bishops were only under house arrest - sometimes even in hotels. In any case, he said, all these

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people have to do is register with the government and there would be no danger of arrest.

U.S. Trained

¶7. (C) Chen was referred to us by a high-level Vatican contact. He studied at St. John's Seminary in Boston in the early 90s before obtaining degrees from the Jesuit-run Weston School of Theology in Boston, and Boston College. He recently visited Boston, and told us he feels more at home there than in Beijing. He had considered staying in Massachusetts, but ultimately decided he wanted to work to help the Chinese church. While in Rome, Chen met with Vatican officials, and clearly maintains an allegiance to the Vatican. He told us he had been mentioned for a possible episcopal appointment, but would only accept a government appointment if he would be recognized also by the Holy See.

Comment

¶8. (C) Chen was convincing in describing his reasons for choosing to work for the Patriotic Church. "That is the best way that I can make a difference," he insisted, by slowly influencing the government toward more open views on religion. "In the underground church, you can't have an impact," he reasoned. On the other hand, we found Chen's ability to rationalize the government's positions on religious freedom and his denigration of the underground church and its members unsettling. We defer to Embassy Beijing and DRL to put Chen's

story in the context of our efforts on the ground in China.
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